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FIRST LEAD POWERS HOMECOMING (160)

BY BURL OBSBORNE

BIG STONE GAP, VA., MARCH 12 (AP)-U2 PILOT FRANCIS GARY POWERS WAS THE CENTER OF A WARM RECEPTION TODAY IN HIS FIRST FACE-TO-FACE MEETING WITH HIS SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA NEIGHBORS SINCE HIS RELEASE FROM A RUSSIAN PRISON.

"IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL HOW ~~I FEEL~~," THE 32-YEAR-OLD PILOT COMMENTED ON HIS RECEPTION.

"THEY ALL SEEMED HAPPY TO SEE ME AND, BELIEVE ME, I'M VERY GLAD TO BE BACK."

HE MET WITH OLD FRIENDS IN A SMALL NORTON CAFE PRIOR TO A MORE FORMAL HOMECOMING CEREMONY LATER IN THE DAY AT AN ARMORY HERE.

POWERS, HIS HAIR TINGED WITH GRAY, TOLD A NEWSMAN, "IT SURE IS NICE TO HEAR A VIRGINIA ACCENT AGAIN."

FLASHING A PLEASANT SMILE FOR ALL, POWERS SAID HE WAS "JUST NOW GETTING THE BRUNT OF THE PUBLIC EYE...I HAD BEEN AWAY FROM IT FOR SEVERAL DAYS."

THE USUALLY PHLEGMATIC MOUNTAIN FOLK GREETED THE MAN IN THE SIMPLY CUT IVY LEAGUE SUIT WITH "CONGRATULATIONS FRANCIS" OR "WE'RE GLAD YOU'RE BACK."

HIS PLANS TO PURCHASE A NEW SUIT WENT AWRY BECAUSE OF THE CROWD WHICH GATHERED TO SEE HIM, MOST FOR THE FIRST TIME. POWERS SAID HE WOULD SPEND A FEW DAYS IN THE AREA WITH HIS PARENTS AND FIVE SISTERS.

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